



RAIN SPATTERED AGGRESSIVELY at the oval window as the plane sped furiously down the runway at Shannon Airport, the sky overhead a flat, foreboding gray.

It had been a short flight, shorter than I'd expected, and part of me was disappointed it was already over; that brief buzz of holiday excitement generated at the airport squashed now I'd actually arrived.

Ever since the front door of the flat had thunked shut behind me this morning I'd been dogged by a nagging sense of unease; the idea that something would prevent me from getting here—canceled trains, sick pilots—or worse. It was as if the sword of Damocles had swayed precariously above my head as I edged my way over the Irish Sea.

After all, I'd waited three long months to be here.

I checked the time on my phone. Just after two in the afternoon and already the weak October light was failing, obscured by sullen black clouds. Mum had warned me that Ireland was notoriously wet, but I hadn't expected it to be so bleak.

I'd landed a few hours after Seb and Lottie, which meant a long, awkward taxi ride alone but I didn't exactly have much choice. There

I dragged myself back into the present. Honestly, I was impressed by the rain—it hadn't let up the whole journey; the rhythmic swiping of the windscreen wipers almost lulling me to sleep as lush green fields swept past. Beneath the fizz of excitement, there was a gnawing hollow ache in my stomach that had rooted itself there the night of the summer ball and had never left. It would be the first time I'd see everyone together—the first time I'd see Seb after the night that had changed everything—

“Shite—*shite!*”

The driver's frenzied cursing broke into my thoughts as the taxi swerved, then rocketed dramatically up onto a grass shoulder, throwing me forward before coming to a bumpy stop before a low flint wall, the engine flatly cutting out. I only narrowly avoided greeting the front seat with my head. My heart shot into my mouth and my breath came fast. I wrenched off my headphones.

“Hey—what—what *happened?* Did—did we hit something?”

I tried to catch the driver's eyes in the mirror but they were squeezed tightly shut, his breathing erratic and wheezy, his skin a troubling shade of gray as one hand clutched at his chest.

“Hey—*hey!* Are you okay?”

Above the steady swoosh of the windscreen wipers I could hear something else. A low broken sobbing. Clumsily unclipping my seat belt, I struggled round to look out of the rear window in the direction of the sound, squeezing my eyes half shut, afraid of what I might see and praying nobody was badly hurt.

A woman was crouched on the grass only a meter or so behind us, her dark slender shape silhouetted starkly against the glowering sky, head bowed and buried in her hands. Her hair was long and darkened by rain, falling over her face and down the sober black dress she wore in straggling tendrils. She was absolutely soaked to the skin.

I fumbled for the door release but it wouldn't budge.

“Shit—did we—did you hit her?”

That sobbing continued. Low and undulating and *heart-breaking*. Now so loud it was as if she were sat in the car with us. I had to resist the urge to clamp my hands over my ears.

“Do—do you think she's hurt? Should we check?”

I forced myself to take another look behind me. Well, she was sitting up—that was good. And there were no obvious signs of any injury. No gallons of pumping blood or limbs hanging at weird angles, thank God. She was probably just in shock.

Still, the crying continued, louder and louder, an unpleasant low, rasping quality to it. Even though she didn't look hurt, I knew from the gruesome emergency service documentaries Mum loved that she might still have some nasty internal injuries. We needed an ambulance.

Other than his ragged breathing, the driver remained silent. Was he in shock too? Or worse—having a heart attack? He wasn't exactly the picture of good health—what if he had a medical condition? *Oh God*. Panic unfurled its dark wings within me and I scrabbled for my phone in the depths of my backpack. My fingers fumbled to unlock it. Was the emergency number even the same over here? I began to key it in, hands shaking, that dark feeling of impending doom stronger than ever. Wow, what a way to start the trip.

Without warning, the car's engine abruptly revved up again, pulling off the grass shoulder with sudden violence and, with a screech of brakes, back onto the road.

"*Hey!*" I said, dropping my phone into the footwell and hurriedly clipping my seat belt back on. "Wait a minute. Shouldn't we go back and check on that woman? I think she was hurt. She was crying back there—"

It hadn't *felt* as if we'd collided with anything. Only swerved to avoid her. But we should have at least checked if she was okay—

*Ironic really, pretending to be citizen of the year after everything I'd done*—The taxi driver cleared his throat.

"What? What are you on about? It was just some old drunk, that's all."

His easygoing banter had entirely evaporated, leaving him cold—borderline unpleasant—his tone unnecessarily cutting.

"She was upset, not *drunk*. She was right behind us. You must have heard her crying?"

"Freck all is what I heard," snapped the taxi driver. Eyes widening, I stared at him in the mirror. He met my gaze with a frown, as if daring me to say more, continuing to drive on at breakneck speed. Then,

with another squeal of complaint from the brakes, he turned sharply off the road and started down a bumpy tree-lined drive, gravel crunching beneath the wheels.

It was dark here.

The twisted elms that lined the drive crowded over us, creating a wizened tunnel. Through the thick crowd of branches I could make out a flat body of water in the distance, brown as gravy and distinctly uninviting. A lake.

“Anyway, we’re here now,” the driver muttered. “If you’re that convinced in what ya saw, you’re more than welcome to take a walk back once I drop you off.”

But I said nothing because there, at the very end of the weed-strewn drive, stood Wren Hall.

It was nothing like I’d imagined.

In my head, I’d envisioned some grand estate from a Jane Austen movie adaption built of pale buttery stone with stately windows that twinkled in the sun and grand Ionic columns either side of a vast door. It was the Wren twins, after all. The same Wren twins whose parents were Greyscott’s most generous donors, a fact I discovered after jokingly pointing out the family resemblance in the stern ancestral portraits that hung in the main lobby of Greyscott’s.

But this Wren Hall looked as if it had been wrenched out of a Gothic novel, bleak and rambling and wreathed in ivy. Mean-looking windows were crammed haphazardly into the gray pebble dash walls. Several turrets stuck out at asymmetric angles, some crenelated, some tiled. The unrelenting rain cascaded over the roof—most of which was covered with a thick slimy moss—pouring into the broken guttering beneath.

The gravel driveway was littered with potholes and cracked urns filled with dead vegetation. From the iron sky above, to its stubborn dark reflection in the large lake, to my own reflection, captured in the dark tint of the car window—everything was *gray*.

For a second or two, I toyed with the idea of asking the driver to take me back to the airport but, after his alarming 180 in attitude and erratic driving skills, getting out of the car seemed the lesser of two evils right now.

He pressed a button that released the trunk.

“There we are, then.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get my case!” I said with cheery passive-aggression, thrusting a wad of euros in his direction, then hauling myself out onto the drive, slamming the door behind me.

I heaved my cheap plastic-shelled case out of the trunk and dumped it beside me, shutting it with purposeful violence. The car immediately sped off, scattering a wave of stones in my direction, and leaving me alone in front of Wren Hall.

The drive was offset, arriving at the side of the house as if added as an afterthought. A pathway continued through a wooden gate on my left, wedged open by weeds, and led down a narrow passageway flanked on one side by the walls of the house and a high, straggling hedge on the other. Feeling oddly watched, I dragged my case past dark little diamond-paned windows set at odd angles into the wall, their leprous frames peeling paint, until I emerged at the front of the house.

Here a ragged lawn ran down to a steep bank, its grass a tired yellow, and disappeared into the thick reeds of the lake. It stretched out far into the distance, the water ominously still and encircled by a dark crescent of forest on the far side.

Wow. Perfect for a swim.

Peeping above the reeds closest to the house, were a series of rounded white objects. Curious, I wandered over to take a closer look.

At some point the lake must have burst its banks and begun encroaching upon the house as—emerging from the waters like an advancing army—were several stone statues. Greek-inspired—a couple were missing heads—and draped with slimy algae. I tried to smile at the sight but, honestly, the overall effect was more unnerving than anything.

Still, with this weather it was hardly surprising. A cold wind blew dead leaves around me in a swirl as I turned to face the house.

I steeled myself.

*Come on, Meg.* I’d come this far. After the most desolate summer break of my life, followed by the six slow and interminable weeks of suspension from Greyscott’s, where the walls of my tiny bedroom seemed to close in on me more and more each day, this was my

chance to be anointed back into Lottie's hallowed inner circle and, arguably more importantly, back into Greyscott's itself.

I took a final glance at the lake, its waters still, almost expectant, and turned back to the house.

A stone plinth set above the door helpfully informed me the house was built in 1768. *Properly* old, then. It was encouraging to see someone had at least tried to make it seem welcoming. Lottie, no doubt. Flanking the heavy wooden door and sheltered beneath a rickety tiled porch were two enormous jack-o'-lanterns, candles merrily flickering away within, accompanied by a large wicker basket filled with exotic-looking squash. Orange fairy lights dressed with fabric autumn leaves twinkled around the door and, from several of the first-floor windows, tea lights glowed warmly inside jewel-colored jars.

Above me, the upper windows of the house stared, blank and dark, out over the lake. I squinted. Was that movement behind them? Were all the others here already? An involuntary shudder racked me.

*Get it together, Meg! They're expecting you.*

I was damp and cold and in a new country—completely out of my element, that was all. I'd be fine once I was inside, finally catching up with Lottie beside a roaring fire, porcelain teacup in hand—Earl Grey with a slice of lemon. The Wrens enjoyed the finer things in life.

Fat spots of rain began to plop on my head so I hastily followed the house round, past a series of murky old greenhouses that leaned against the house, their black frames skeletal against the starkness of the sky, until I found what must be the kitchen door. It was old and heavy, the utilitarian blue paint scratched and peeling, a pane of wire-latticed safety glass in the middle. Beside it, just as Lottie promised in her last message, was a large urn filled with brackish rainwater and weeds. Wincing, I lifted it, spilling a glut of foul-smelling brown water over my new Converse. Muttering curses, I snatched the key from the ground.

It was unremarkable. Just a regular bronze Yale, a plastic tag proclaiming KITCHEN hanging from it. Despite not seeing the slightest hint of a person for miles around, I still gave a stealthy glance around before inserting the key into the lock and opening the door.

I didn't step inside immediately.

The kitchen beyond was vast and gloomy. Shadows thickening to darkness in its corners. A thick odor of dust slunk out, immediately irritating my nose. It was as if no one had stepped foot in here for decades.

*"Hello?"* I called out, but my voice was immediately swallowed by the vast emptiness beyond.

So, reluctantly, I stepped into the house.